

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE 16-17TIME
10 November 1980

The Days Dwindled Down

The fate of the hostages remained the last major election issue

Nov. 4 is not just Election Day. It is also the first anniversary of the seizure of the U.S. embassy in Tehran. In the final stages of the presidential campaign, suspense over whether the hostages would still be captive or finally free on Nov. 4 increasingly preoccupied Jimmy Carter, Ronald Reagan and the American electorate.

On Sunday, the Iranian Parliament finally took steps that could release the hostages. But no matter when or how it is finally resolved, the hostage crisis so dominated the pre-election news that there was a danger that voters would let their judgment of Carter's whole presidency be inordinately affected by one important but in many ways aberrant issue: his effort to free 52 fellow citizens approaching their 52nd week in the hands of a foreign regime that is in a state of both war and near anarchy.

Carter knew that. Reagan knew it too. So did the powers that be in Iran. Last week, largely because the American election was at hand, the bizarre interplay between U.S. domestic politics and the pandemonium that passes for government in Iran became more feverish, preoccupying and unpredictable than ever. Carter hoped that the hostages would be released before Election Day but not soon enough for them to reach the U.S. and the press. The reason: White House fears that some hostages would denounce the President for the way he handled the crisis.

For several weeks there had been rumors that a hostage deal was imminent, and its broad outlines were well known. On Sept. 12, the Ayatullah Ruhollah Khomeini pared down to four the conditions for the hostages' freedom: return of the late Shah's fortune, unfreezing of Iranian assets in U.S. banks, cancellation of U.S. claims against Iran, and guarantees of non-interference in Iranian affairs. The fourth condition was the easiest for the U.S. to meet, since the Carter Administration had always denied any intention of thwarting the Iranian revolution.

The other three conditions all had to do with cash, which Iran badly needs to shore up its ailing economy and to wage its six-week-old war with Iraq. The Administration agreed in principle to release the money and find ways of cutting through the legal tangles (see BUSINESS).

Another American inducement for Iran to free the hostages emerged during indirect negotiations conducted through Algerian, Swiss and other intermediaries:

the battle-weary Iranian military, which relies on American equipment purchased under the Shah, desperately needs spare parts that the U.S. has refused to deliver because of the hostage crisis. The Administration has said that once the hostages are free, Iran can have about \$100 million worth of "nonlethal" military equipment that it has already paid for (e.g., spare parts for C-130 transport aircraft). So far, Iran has remained vague about whether it also insists on immediate

to put the deal to a vote. Back in Washington even the most skeptical officials were optimistic. But they, like Rafsanjani himself, neglected to reckon with the ingenuity of Iran's diehards. On Thursday, the day set for the debate, about 70 deputies stayed home or refused to take their seats, preventing a quorum of 180 and thus blocking a vote.

One deputy in attendance was the Ayatullah Sadegh Khalkhali, the notorious "hanging judge" who has ordered over a hundred people executed. He, like most of the senior mullahs, supported the deal. Cursing the organizers of the boycott as "truant kids," he pounded his fists so hard on his desk that his turban fell off.

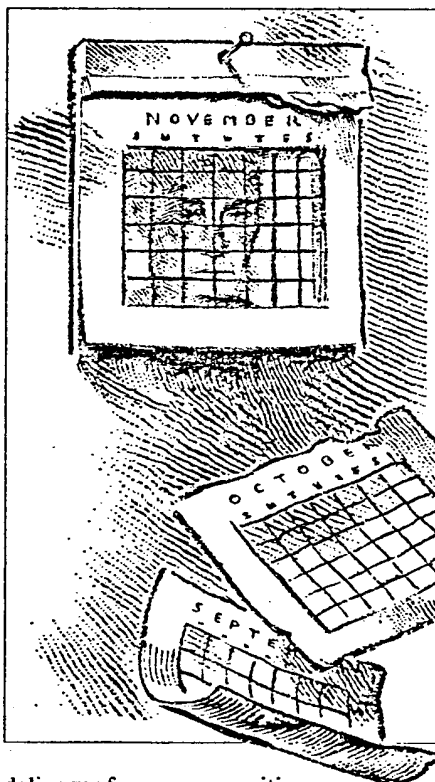
The assembly was adjourned until Sunday—only two days before the U.S. election. Khomeini's heir apparent, the Ayatullah Hussein Ali Montazeri, denounced the parliamentary obstructionists for "shirking their duty" to "the revolutionary people of Iran." Montazeri virtually ordered the Majlis to act. Official Iranian propaganda was already billing the compromise as a surrender by the U.S. Meanwhile, a U.S. Air Force ambulance plane was standing by in West Germany.

At the Sunday session, the Majlis deputies voted by what an official announcement called a "decisive majority" to approve Khomeini's four conditions as the basis for the hostages' release.

Word reached Carter while he was campaigning in the Midwest, and he abruptly returned to Washington to consult with his top foreign-policy advisers on the precise meaning of the Majlis vote.

White House Press Secretary Jody Powell promised that the U.S. response would be consistent with American law, national interest, national honor and concern for the hostages' safety. He added that the President was "encouraged" but cautioned against another burst of optimism. The Administration was worried both about contributing to hopes that might still be dashed and also about provoking the Iranians with anything that seemed like gloating.

Only a few days earlier, one member of the Administration had inexplicably made a remark that surely would not help matters. Interviewed by the Shreveport, La., *Journal*, White House Congressional Liaison Frank Moore asserted that Khomeini was dying of cancer of the colon. Moore added that after Khomeini's death



delivery of guns, ammunition and other weaponry it had bought.

With the U.S. willing to pay Khomeini's price, and with the war against Iraq going badly, the Majlis, or Iranian parliament, finally seemed to be moving to seal the deal. The leaders of the Majlis realized how much Carter was hoping for a pre-election breakthrough. They knew they would lose bargaining leverage against the U.S. once the election was past no matter who was the victor: Carter would have less political reason to press for a deal, and Reagan's general attitude is uncompromising.

Everything seemed set. Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, the speaker of the Majlis, was sure he had enough support